Mobile Home, America

A Look Inside the Lives of Manufactured Homeowners Facing a Disappearing Space

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ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is a work of long-form, narrative journalism. Since mobile homes grew in popularity after World War II, these spaces have come to be some of the most affordable avenues to homeownership. However, as cities and suburbs expand across the nation, mobile home parks are often removed to make way for new developments. This thesis tackles the question: how are mobile home park residents affected by urban development?

Mobile Home, America centers on Austin, Texas, one of the fastest-growing cities in the nation. A culmination of interviews with displaced residents, developers, community activists, city officials, and affordable housing experts, it is a deep dive into vulnerable communities that often go unnoticed. The story follows four families displaced from two mobile home parks in Austin and chronicles the city's response to their displacement. Finally, it ends with the most recent update on Austin's mobile home park policies, which are being discussed in CodeNEXT, the city's proposed change to the land development code.

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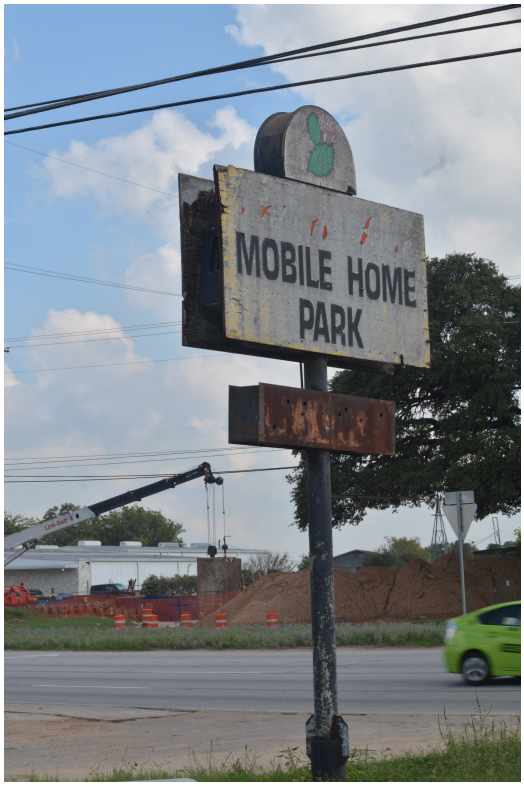


The entrance of Cactus Rose Mobile Home Park features a rusted sign. All photos by Ashley Ephraim.

A rusted sign reading “Mobile Home Park” still stands at the entrance. Above it sits a faded painting of a cactus topped with a pink flower and peeling red letters spelling out the park’s name, Cactus Rose. But Cactus Rose Mobile Home Park doesn’t look like much of a home anymore.

The land is nearly vacated, except for a few mobile homes and a rusted RV. Everyone is supposed to be out by the end of the month. Most people have left already, lugging their homes with them or abandoning them altogether. The property has become a land of things left behind. Old refrigerators, green plastic lawn chairs, a Radio Flyer red wagon, car seats, laundry baskets, a baby doll, dirt-covered floppy discs, bulky TVs, tires, cinder blocks, a tattered Playboy. A child’s pink wooden kitchen set, complete with a fake stove and timer, is piled on scraps of wood and old mattresses. An old taupe sofa sits on its back. The cushions are gone. There’s typical trash, too, sprinkled around the abandoned furniture and appliances. Old Gatorade bottles. Plastic 32-ounce Big Gulp cups. Dirt-covered HEB grocery bags.

There’s no telling what people will take with them and what they’ll leave behind when they’re forced to pick up and move. Sometimes, though, the remnants tell a story. In Austin, Texas, Cactus Rose was a family community. A place where children played pretend kitchen, and people relaxed after work, watching TV from the comforts of their couch. But it also was a

place that sat on land ripe for redevelopment in a rapidly growing city. The Cactus Rose story was unfortunate in many ways, but in many others, it was simply an American one. As cities and suburbs expand across the nation, mobile home parks are often removed to make way for apartment complexes, displacing communities in the process. Sometimes these park closures happen quietly. Families pack up and move on. Other times, they're battles, ones that embroil residents, developers, city officials, and human rights activists in months or even years of dispute. Either way, mobile home park evictions can push already marginalized members of a community into the outskirts of town and further into poverty.

Lot 51 still has the rectangular outline of where a mobile home once stood. It was Saúl Madero's residence for the past 15 years. He and his wife raised their four children there. Now, the plot is empty, flanked by an abandoned, rusted RV and a dilapidated mobile home. He wants to show me where he used to live, so I stand nearby the lot, waiting for him to get here. Soon enough, a run-down maroon minivan bounces down the gravel path that leads to the park. It's Madero. He parks and steps out of the van, dressed in camouflage cargo pants and combat boots. His black hair is gelled back, except for a few curls above his forehead. His face is free of wrinkles, but his sideburns are turning gray. He speaks in broken English and sometimes in Spanish, telling me about the trees and shrubs that surround the park, which were some of his favorite aspects of the community. A tree-lined walkway led to a field where he would take his kids sometimes as they grew up.

For Madero, Cactus Rose is not just a place he used to call home but also the community he spent the past two years trying to save. In 2015, the landowners 500 Bastrop Highway Ltd.

Saul Madero, a former Cactus Rose resident, looks around the remains of the closing park.

applied for a zoning change for the mobile home park's land and surrounding space. If it were approved, development company Oden Hughes would build a 356-unit apartment complex there. Madero organized residents to oppose the change. The community was tight-knit, and many wanted to remain together and to stay if at all possible. But in a growing city like Austin, Texas, where affordable housing is diminishing, land is often scooped up for new development no matter the cost — especially on the East Side, where Cactus Rose resided.

Madero walks over to the tree that used to hang over his mobile home. Behind it, he spots an old neighbor, Regino Herrero.

Madero tells me Herrero is known to use his money to feed the stray cats that roamed the land. Right now, he's sitting in a lawn chair, and opened cans of cat food are scattered on the ground. A few strays come up and eat out of the cans. Even though the park is almost empty, Herrero still appears to be living here. He has a cart next to him full of grocery bags and toilet paper. Madero tells me Herrero's new home, an RV a church helped him purchase, is now in a park farther outside the city, but Herrero is accustomed to the bus route here that takes him to work and back to Cactus Rose. He hasn't quite figured out what bus takes him to his new home.

Throughout the morning, former neighbors drive up to what remains of the park to dig through the various piles of trash. Madero greets a woman who has just pulled up. She gets out of her car and begins rifling through one pile, examining a pair of jeans lying on the ground. Then another former neighbor enters the grounds in a truck.

A former Cactus Rose resident searches for leftover wood planks in a trash pile.

"¿Hola, cómo estás? ¿Y tu esposa?"" Madero asks, after the man turns off his car. *How are you? And your wife?*

"Bien, bien," he shouts out the car window.

The two make small talk some more, as the former neighbor begins sifting through slabs of wood lying around the park and piling a few into the trunk of his pickup.

Madero walks around the property some more, gravel crunching under his boots. On the far right side sat several small duplexes that lined the rim of the mobile home park. The residents there were told to leave as well. Now, one of the homes has shattered windows and is partly burned down. Since people have started vacating, the area has become a prime spot for illegal activity to hide. Not long ago, drug activity led to a fire in one of the abandoned homes.

Madero then circles to the other side of the park, toward more piles of trash. One of the things left behind is a hardback picture book. The cover is torn and splattered with dirt, but the title is still visible: "A House Blessing." Inside, it outlines a prayer for the home. "May the strength of its walls make you safe," it reads, "keeping peace within and trouble without."

One resident left behind a book outlining a prayer for the home titled "A House Blessing."

Systematically hidden

Some 18 million people live in mobile homes, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Like many Cactus Rose residents had done, people often turn to mobile home living because of its affordability. According to the American Housing Survey, the median value of a mobile home in 2016 was $41,000. For regular houses, the median price sits at around $200,000.

Mobile homes came to be out of necessity. After World War II, men and women were coming home from the war and inexpensive housing was needed in large supply. The mobile home industry filled that need. In the 1940s, the number of mobile homes was so small that they were not counted separately in the census, but by 2000, they made up nearly 8 percent of the total housing stock in the U.S., an increase that occurred alongside the decrease in federal funds allocated to low-income housing in the country.

Now, mobile homes — also known as manufactured homes and not to be confused with RVs — are the nation's largest source of unsubsidized affordable housing. They're an option many low-income families turn to. According to the Manufactured Housing Institute, the national trade organization representing factory-built housing, the median income for these households is about $30,000.

Their popularity might be surprising, considering mobile homes themselves are marginalized, hidden out of sight and off highways. Their secluded nature didn't happen by chance, but rather, by design. Mobile home parks have a history of laws requiring they be set back a certain distance from roads and walled off from surrounding developments. Policy guides from the American Planning Commission note this history, acknowledging many states have laws that ostracize manufactured home communities. Their physical invisibility means they often go unnoticed, and their problems do, too.

Park residents are in the predicament of owning the home in which they reside but not the land on which their home sits. In most cases, they rent the lots they place their homes on. As renters, they're at risk of displacement whenever landowners seek to change the park's land use, forcing them to move their home — which isn't an easy or cheap task. Across the country, urban redevelopment and suburban sprawl puts pressure on park owners to sell or convert their parks. Park closures result in mass evictions, as was the case in Cactus Rose, where 51 households were displaced. This process, though, isn't very public. Mobile home park closures don't require documentation by state or national entities, so comprehensive data on closures isn't available.

Texas has an estimated 4,073 mobile home parks, the third-highest ranked state, behind California and Florida, according to the Housing Assistance Council, a nonprofit in Washington DC. It's also home to three of the nation's fastest growing metro areas, Austin included, making displacement here likely. Around two million people live in mobile homes in Texas, but legal protections here are minimal. When a park closes, landowners don't have to give residents more than 60 days to relocate, meaning they have to move their home or face fines for abandoning it.

Austin's changing landscape

Cactus Rose sat in the Montopolis neighborhood, off the bustling Bastrop Highway, a route many take to get to the city's main airport. The homes were arranged in a U-shape with three rows squeezed in the middle. Most rows consisted of manufactured homes—many old—with a few RVs fit in between. The bus stop was a short walk away. Across the highway sat Callahan's General Store, an Austin landmark that sells everything from hardware to cowboy hats to baby chicks. Cactus Rose was home primarily to low-income Hispanic families, several of whom were undocumented immigrants from Mexico.

The park was east of Interstate 35, which, because of a long history of segregationist policies, has come to be the physical manifestation of Austin's racial and economic division. The vast majority of Austin's Hispanic and African-American populations live east of it. Low-income residents live in high concentration east of I-35, and high-income residents tend to live west of it. A 2015 study from the University of Toronto's Prosperity Institute found Austin-Round Rock was the least likely city where wealthy individuals and blue-collar workers were to live in the same neighborhood.

Montopolis is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Austin. In fact, it was almost the capital of the Republic of Texas. After the Civil War, formerly enslaved sharecroppers began to populate Montopolis. Then with the influx of Latino residents in the early and mid-20th century, the area transitioned to a primarily Latino neighborhood. In recent years, the city's continued development eastward has brought gentrification pressure to Montopolis. Still, it remains one of the least expensive places to live in Austin. In October 2017, the real estate data analytics site NeighborhoodX found the average listing price in Montopolis is $202 per square foot, more affordable than nearby areas like Pecan Springs-Springdale at $232 per square foot and Westgate at $261 per square foot, and certainly more affordable than Austin's Downtown which costs an average of $594 per square foot.

Montopolis is known for its resistance to gentrification and erasure. For example, after KEEP Investment Group/Real Estate purchased land that was home to the former Montopolis Negro School in 2015, community members fought back. The school taught African-American children between 1935 and 1962, when the county was segregated, and many felt it had a historical significance. When KEEP obtained a demolition permit for the building so the land could be developed, activists and members of the Montopolis Neighborhood Association

protested, shouting “Save African-American History” outside the rundown building. The noise garnered attention, and in October 2017 the City Council voted to purchase the site and potentially turn the structure into a museum.

Though members of this community have resisted change, it’s not immune. It’s lost two mobile home parks to development in the past year. Continual job growth in technology, transportation, and warehousing in Austin has led to drastic population growth. From 2000 to 2017, the city’s population increased by 45 percent to 949,587. The Austin-Round Rock area is the ninth fastest-growing metropolitan area in the nation and currently home to more than 2.1 million, according to March 2018 U.S. Census Bureau estimates.

With more people moving to Austin, housing prices have gone up, and the development of more places to live is imperative in creating affordable housing. According to Austin’s Strategic Housing Blueprint, the city needs to build 135,000 new housing units by 2025 to keep up with population growth. But this development process isn’t necessarily an inclusive one. Ironically, it’ll encourage the removal of the city’s last remnants of affordable housing: mobile homes. And in Austin, Latinos disproportionately populate mobile home parks. While they comprise 35 percent of Austin’s population, they make up 60 percent of the city’s mobile home park population, according to a recent report from the Latino Research Initiative at The University of Texas at Austin.

The report, “Housing Affordability in Austin Brings New Attention to Mobile Home Parks,” which released in November 2017, found 16 out of 41 mobile home parks in Austin are at risk of re-development. They’re at-risk because they lie in spaces in the City of Austin’s Future Land Use plans with designations other than mobile home park use, such as “mixed use,” “commercial” and “high density single family.” This makes it easy for property owners to

redevelop, according to Gabriel Amaro, who spearheaded the study. “Basically, if I’m a developer and I wanted to buy one of the at-risk properties, I would have an easier time rezoning it to be something else other than mobile home park use,” Amaro says. Most of these 16 parks lie on Austin’s East Side. Cactus Rose made the list, and development there has already begun. At the beginning of 2017, another park, Thrasher Lane Mobile Home Park, which wasn’t included in LRI’s research because the study only looked at parks five acres or larger, was removed and sold for redevelopment. LRI estimates there are at least 1,299 low-income mobile home households in Austin that could be displaced in the coming years.

Starting over

Saúl Madero knows a thing or two about standing up for himself. He grew up in Acapulco, a well-known resort town on the Pacific coast in Guerrero, Mexico. In his youth, he grew frustrated with bullies in his neighborhood who would pick on him and his friends. “How can I fight these guys?” he would think to himself. After watching the original Rambo movie, he felt inspired. He decided to join the military at age 15. A week after completing the ninth grade, he was in boot camp, training daily to become a soldier. And he was somewhat of a star. At 16, he competed in an endurance competition that would determine if he could join the special forces. Though he was young and inexperienced, he made it. Each time he returned to his neighborhood in his uniform, he felt his neighbors respected him.

After serving seven years in the military, Madero got a job driving 18-wheelers for a construction engineering company. He married and had two kids. Then a new goal began to form: move to the United States. In 1995, he came to Austin, with the hope of achieving his

dream in the back of his mind. He wanted to become an American soldier. But decades later, nothing's really turned out as he thought it would.

When he moved to Austin, purchasing a mobile home was his best option because of its affordability. He also liked the fact that he wouldn't have neighbors moving in and out of apartments next door to him, and Cactus Rose was close Joe's Bakery on East Seventh Street, where he worked. Over the years, he and his wife had two more children. At Cactus Rose, they met friends like Francisco Nuñez and Rafaela Guevara, another couple with four kids. Too, they met Oscar García, who lived with his parents in a mobile home, sending money back to his wife and children in Mexico. Madero found a community of people like him, individuals who had come to the U.S. and were trying support their children. About once a month, he held parties at his home. Neighbors would show up throughout the night as they got off work to eat food and sing karaoke. Oftentimes, gatherings lasted until 2 a.m. It didn't matter what their homes looked like. Cactus Rose was a place where they could be themselves, speak Spanish, be understood.

Now, everyone has moved on. Madero still works at Joe's Bakery, a Mexican restaurant and bakery, as a waiter, but since having to leave Cactus Rose, he's had to get another job to afford his new place of residence. His family moved to a higher end mobile home park called River Ridge Estates, after selling their 1979 mobile home, which was too old for any surrounding parks to accept. Since many parks in Austin are near capacity, landowners have set age limits on which homes they will and won't accept. Madero and his

Madero sits at the kitchen table in his new mobile home in River Ridge Estates.

family chose a place in South Austin, not wanting to risk living in another park on the East Side that could be the next one to face displacement.

Now he sits at his new home on his morning off, in a gray button-up and khakis. Two of his children are grown up and living on their own. At this house, it's just him, his wife, their youngest daughter, who is now 15, and their youngest son, who is 19. Their new mobile home is spacious. There's a brown L-shaped sectional facing a television and a stack of DVDs. The kitchen table is a simple, brown wooden structure with matching chairs. Light tan tiles line the floor. From the inside, you can't really tell it's a manufactured home.

This morning, María's at school, and the house is quiet. There's a floral-patterned plate on the table with a half-eaten tortilla on top, leftovers from a breakfast unfinished. In a few hours, he'll have to head to his second job, a new one he recently picked up at La Michoacana, a carniceria and grocery store chain.

River Ridge Estates is nothing like Cactus Rose. Palm trees flank the entrance of the park. A mini-golf course sits across the street. Within the park, there are paved roads, and each home has a driveway. His neighbors are quiet and peaceful, but he doesn't really know them. If he needed to band together with them like at the last park, it wouldn't be easy. There are playgrounds and parking lots for guests. Driving through the park feels more like driving through a suburban

The homes of River Ridge Estates each have their own paved driveway.

neighborhood than anything else. Of course, that makes living here much more expensive, but his daughter had picked out the place, and he wanted to make her happy. Now that he has to make payments for a new home and rent the lot, he's paying about $1,300 a month. He works nearly all day every day to afford the place. He's happy, though. For the morning, he can relax. It was a long road getting here.

The battle

The rumors started to spread in September 2015. The park was closing. Developers Oden Hughes had a contract to purchase 23 acres of land from 500 Bastrop Highway Ltd., which had filed for a zoning change. The land included Cactus Rose Mobile Home Park. If approved, the change would allow Oden Hughes to build a complex of 356 apartments and 20,500 square feet of commercial space.

The Montopolis Neighborhood Plan Contact Team, a group of advocates that work with the city on behalf of their neighborhood, was first notified of the potential zoning change. When Susana Almanza, the president of the contact team, saw the zoning case, she recognized immediately a mobile home park sat on that land. The team went door to door at the park, handing out flyers and talking to residents about the future of the land.

Many residents were worried. They didn't know how much time they would have to find a new place to live. Early on they were told they would have to be out in just a few months. Questions flooded Madero's mind: *Where would they go? How would he move his home?* He was used to paying $400 a month before utilities. Finding another affordable place to live in a city where the median price of a two-bedroom apartment was $1,380 a month didn't seem feasible.

At the same time, many residents were afraid to do anything to try to prevent their displacement. Not everyone was documented, so they feared being in the public eye or talking to officials at City Hall about the zoning change. They also worried about speaking up against the landlord who could easily raise their rent for the time they had left at Cactus Rose. Many didn't have time to deal with the issue because they were working multiple jobs and had families to take care of. In a January 2016 hearing on the zoning case with the city's Planning Commission, Almanza says only two residents showed up, even though all were invited. Madero was one of them. He addressed the commission members, saying the new development would displace a community of about 200 people. The Planning Commission did not recommend the change, concerned it would remove affordable housing from Austin and displace residents. The developers were told to go back to the drawing board to work out a relocation deal with the residents before the City Council hearing that would determine the fate of their project.

Madero was desperate. He began to rally supporters, going door to door to convince his neighbors to stand by him and attend meetings with the developers and the Contact Team to ensure they got a fair deal in the move. They formed a residents' association so that they could more efficiently negotiate with the developers. Madero took on the role of president.

As the hearing at the City Council meeting neared, residents got busy. They made T-shirts, contacted news media and gathered at the City Council Meeting in September. The Montopolis Contact Team worked with the residents to get them to the meeting. They brought vans and packed sandwiches and drinks. Residents brought their kids. They all wore the same green T-shirt that had a black and white photo of some of the park residents' children on the front of it.

The residents told the Council they were concerned that they could not find an affordable place to live in Austin or that their homes would be too old to move without breaking. They proposed that the developers accomodate them by constructing a new mobile home park within the planned development. Another option they put forward was that the City of Austin provide city-owned land for them to relocate to, within a 2.5 mile radius, with funding for new or used mobile homes provided by the developers. The Community Development Commission, which advises the council on programs designed to serve the poor and the community at large, supported the residents, but neither Oden Hughes nor the city would agree to meet these requests. "Through this process, I learned that the city had a big stigma," Almanza says. "That one of the reasons they were pushing back was because they had a big stigma about building mobile homes or providing mobile homes in the core."

The City Council asked the developers, who were now offering residents $5,000 to relocate by the end of 2016, to go back to come up with a better deal. Two months of negotiations later, the developers and the Cactus Rose Residents' Association came to an agreement. All residents would be able to remain within 2.9 miles of their current residence, their children could remain in the same school district, and mobile home owners would be compensated $10,000. This money was intended to aid with relocation, and residents were connected with a bilingual real estate agent. While these terms were met, residents are still facing the effects of the move. And as for other parks in the city, Almanza knows it could be only a matter of time before the same thing happens to them.

The noise created by the residents, though, spurred a lasting benefit for mobile home park residents in Austin at risk of displacement. Their stories encouraged City Council to include mobile home owners in the new Tenant Notification and Relocation Assistance Ordinance.

Adopted on Sept. 1, 2016, the ordinance mandates that developers who want to apply for a zoning change give apartment renters 120-day notice of a move-out date and mobile home residents a 270-day notice and potentially help pay for relocation assistance. The original idea for the ordinance, though, only came to be due to a string of mistreatments of apartment residents being relocated, particularly the Shoreline Apartments in 2009 and Lakeview Apartments in 2015. The Cactus Rose residents' persistence in getting their voices heard encouraged the City Council to add them to the ordinance as well.

Still, property owners have found ways to skirt around the ordinance by evicting residents and then selling the property to developers, who can then apply for a zoning change without regards to the policy. And though the ordinance was created in 2016, the relocation funding aspect of it has not yet been established. The ordinance plans to have developers and a public fund contribute to relocation costs. However, the city must first complete a nexus study to determine how much developers should contribute. Lauren Avioli of the Neighborhood Housing and Community Development Committee says the request for funding for the study has been put in the committee's budget request for the 2018-2019 fiscal year. The study will take time. She says it likely won't be until 2019 that the fee will be considered for approval and the ordinance can be implemented completely. The Council could at any time appropriate money to the public fund for relocation assistance, but it has yet to do so.

For now, Madero has one piece of advice for mobile home residents: stick together. "Get an association," he says. "People like that have the power to fight the city if something is not right. Organize. Know your neighborhood."

Missing community

Francisco Nuñez and Rafaela Guevara don't know their neighbors now.

After being displaced from Cactus Rose, the couple and their children moved to Austin Pecan Park. The mobile home and RV park sits off Highway 71 in Del Valle, an unincorporated area of Travis County east of Austin. During their discussions, the Cactus Rose owners were able to make arrangements with Austin Pecan Park and got about five families placed here. If you're not looking for it, you'll likely miss the entrance. It's tucked away off the highway, but once you're inside, rows and rows of mobile homes come into view. It's a wonder the owners were able to squeeze in more homes.

Mobile homes are lined up close to one another at Austin Pecan Park.

On an October evening, children play on porches. Cars pull up and park next to their respective mobile homes. Nuñez and Guevara, who both clean homes for a living, have recently come home from work. Their mobile home is painted peach. Chipped flower pots filled with

wilted plants are lined up alongside it. A pink flamingo sits within the greenery, along with a white plastic swan. Nuñez's '82 pickup is parked out front. Their yellow Labrador retriever, Chance, barks from his cage outside when they walk past and step through their front door. They're about to settle in for the night, likely to take part in one of their favorite pastimes, watching telenovelas from the comforts of their pullout couch.

Nuñez is wearing a Rolling Stones T-shirt. Guevara is wearing a look of worry, one she almost always has. Since they moved here in May, nothing's quite felt right. Nuñez says he feels like mobile home park owners can do whatever they want. The couple started off paying $500 a month, and two months later, the rent rose to $600. But this isn't anything new. At Cactus Rose, they experienced random rent increases as well. "What are we to do?" he wonders. "Grab our house and leave?" The streets, here, are awful, too, he says. Bumps in the road will scrape the

Francisco Nuñez and Rafaela Guevara sit in their living room. Their home is decorated for Halloween.

bottom of cars, and potholes are abundant. The houses are packed tightly together. He feels like nothing more than a profit opportunity to the owners. “That is the only thing we are, and it’s not important to them how difficult it is to earn money to pay them,” he says in Spanish.

And he worries the same thing that happened at Cactus Rose could happen here. Before Cactus Rose was sold, he noticed other surrounding businesses began shutting down: a veterinarian clinic and two other stores. Within a year, they were all gone. Then they found out Cactus Rose was closing, too, as new development was coming to the area. Since moving to Austin Pecan Park, he’s noticed a nearby store close and he wonders if it’s an omen. Austin Pecan Park, which holds almost 60 homes, didn’t make it into the Latino Research Initiative’s study, though, because it’s not within the city limits. The couple was lucky enough to not have had to move so far outside the city (about three miles east of Cactus Rose). But because of that short distance, they could still be susceptible to the effects of a growing city.

The main issue, according to Nuñez, isn’t that they have to pay more now for conditions that aren’t exactly favorable (at Cactus Rose, they paid $475 a month) or that their commute is a little longer. The issue is community. Right now, they don’t feel as if they have one.

Living in Cactus Rose was a beautiful thing, Nuñez says. The roads were rough and the dumpsters were constantly overflowing with garbage, as people not living in the park were known to drop off their trash there illegally. But the friendships were special. During the nearly two decades they lived there, they could turn to their neighbors in times of need. If they had to go out of town for a few days, a neighbor would look after their home and vice versa. As they grew up, their kids had other children to play with. Now, they don’t.

Halloween decorations fill the inside of Nuñez and Guevara's mobile home. A vase full of bright orange sunflowers sits on the kitchen table. An arrangement of plastic jack o'lanterns and skeletons decorates the living room cabinets. Fake black spiderwebs are draped over a family portrait, and plastic witches dangle from the ceiling. Guevara loves to decorate her home and is known for going above and beyond during holidays.

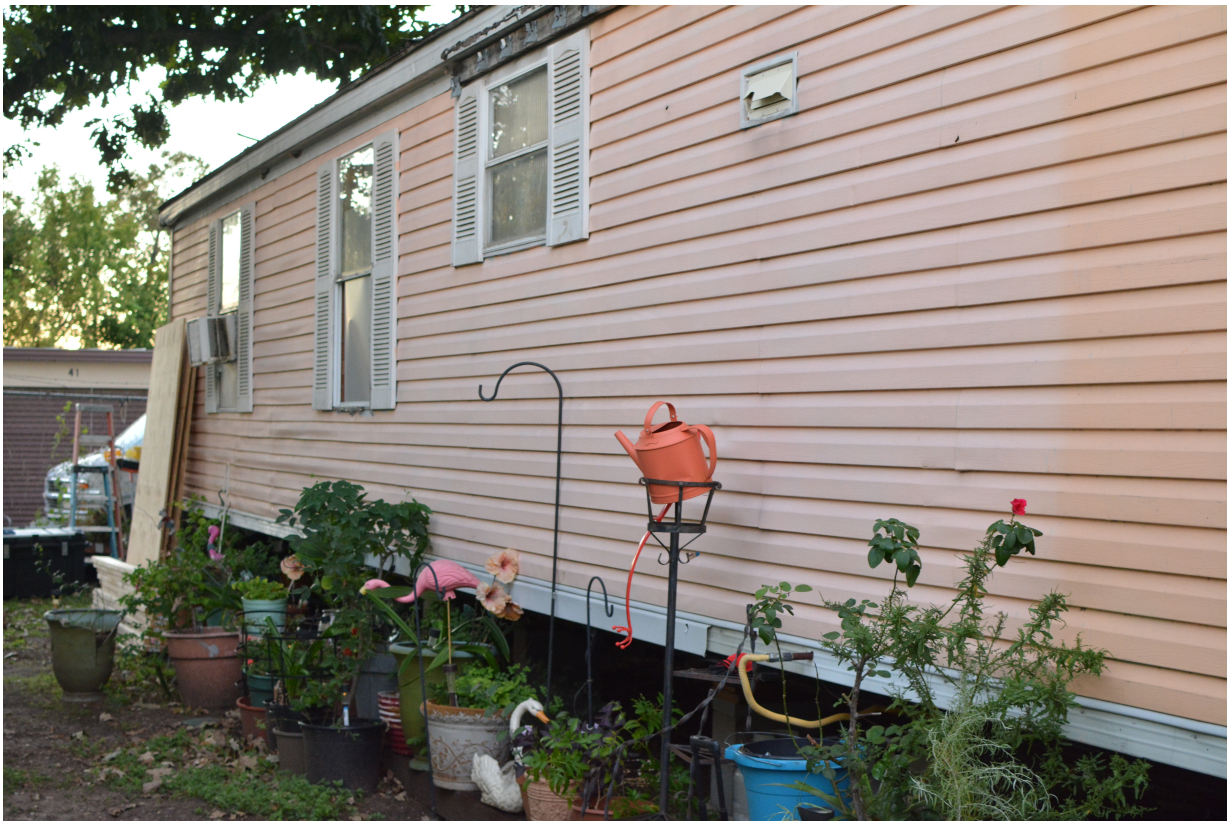
Nuñez and Guevara keep an altar set up in their mobile home.

Near the front door, there's an altar. A photo of the Virgin Mary hangs above a wooden table, adorned with candles, figurines of saints, and a vase of fresh yellow marigolds. A large white Bible sits in the middle. It stays there year-round, but there's not a speck of dust on it. Or anywhere in the house really. Guevara loves caring for her home and cleans often, even though she works cleaning houses all day. To her, this house is not simply an object. It's where her four children—Natali, Susi, Francisco, and Neli—grew up. And it took a lot of effort to pay it off. "Thank God we have one," she says in Spanish about having a home. "It's very important to me, even though it's a mobile home."

Taking care of what they have is a concept Nuñez and Guevara try to instill in their children. The way they take care of their house is how they take care of everything. Nuñez has had the same truck since the 1980s and the same toolbox for 20 years. "My wife has all of her temporary decoration items for various times of the year," Nuñez says in Spanish. "These things are like memories. It's like your son's first shoe. I think it's a beautiful thing."

When Cactus Rose shut down and developers gave residents money to find a new place to live, the family didn't want to give up their home, the thing they'd worked so hard to purchase and call their own. They decided to move it—but even that came with its own slew of problems.

The couple paid over $2,000 to move the home, and when they got to the new park, there was a large tree in the way. They had to wait two weeks in order to connect their trailer to water and electricity because of the tree. Nuñez and Guevara lived in their home without light or water during that time. Whenever they needed to use the restroom, they'd go to a nearby store. They paid for their two youngest daughters, who were still living at home, to stay in a hotel.



Nuñez and Guevara's mobile home is painted peach and decorated with plants.

Before moving from Cactus Rose, Nuñez and Guevara were accustomed to picking up and moving. Nuñez is from the Federal District of Mexico City, and Guevara is from San Luis Potosí, Mexico. For Nuñez, moving to the U.S. was a choice. He first visited while on vacation

with friends in Chicago. He worked and lived in the city for six months, and after he returned to Mexico, he resigned from his job and decided to move to the U.S. permanently. For Guevara, moving to the U.S. was not a choice. She didn't want to come to the U.S., but had no other option than to leave her home. She can hardly talk about her past in Mexico without coming to tears. "If I had stayed I would have felt like I was dead but alive," she says.

The two met through mutual friends in Austin and decided to get married. They moved into Cactus Rose right before Christmas in 1999. A mobile home was the best option for them financially, and Cactus Rose was near the city core, where they worked. Their kids all attended Del Valle High School, and the two eldest went off to college but both dropped out because of financial troubles. Now, they take courses when they can. Neli, a senior in high school, hopes to attend the University of North Texas when she graduates in 2018.

Though their children are growing up and moving on, they still visit. Like tonight, their son Francisco is here. He walks in with a silver birdcage with a white winged-dove inside. Its feathers are gray, and it looks like it belongs in the wild.

Guevara coos to the family's pet bird.

Sitting on the rectangular ottoman in the living room, Guevara asks him to bring the bird over. "Dámelo," she says. He walks the cage over to her, and she opens it, slipping her hand inside so the bird can latch onto her finger. She pulls the bird out of the cage, and in this moment, everything about Guevara relaxes. Her worried face reveals a subtle smile. Her eyes soften. She begins cooing to the bird. A friend of hers had found

the bird as a fledgling a few months ago. The bird didn't have any feathers or a mother, so Guevara took it in and her son nurtured it to good health. Now the bird, nicknamed Baby Chuy, roams the house whenever it likes and never flies away.

It continues to sit on Guevara's finger for a while as she speaks to it affectionately. Nuñez sits down next to her, and the bird hops onto his leg. He smiles. For this evening, it's a moment of calm, a respite from the tumultuous past few years. It's a moment of togetherness and family. *Comunidad*.

A family divided

In an office of the Heritage Park Rehabilitation Center, a nursing home in East Austin, there's a photo of a dark-haired woman and two young boys. The photos belong to Oscar García, the center's housekeeping supervisor. He first started working here about a decade ago, moving his way up the janitorial rungs. First, he was a housekeeper, then a janitor, then a floor technician, a manager's assistant and finally the main supervisor. The promotion doesn't come with a fancy office. There's an old refrigerator in one corner that makes a whirring sound throughout the day. The floor is an ugly green linoleum. He stores work boots against a wall, and decor consists of a bulletin board adorned with photos of racecars. It's certainly not soundproof; even when the door is closed, you can hear the pained screams of elderly residents down the hall. But against the back wall, he has his own space: a desk. Above it, he hangs work achievements he's received over the years, like a Bloodborne Pathogens Training certificate of completion kept nice inside a three-hole punch plastic binder sleeve, along with photos of his wife and their two young boys, all of whom still live in Mexico.

Most of García's life has been plagued by division. García first moved to the U.S. at age 11. His father had applied for permanent residency status for himself and his family, but only García and his mother were approved. His sister and brother stayed behind in Mexico. His mother brought him over to attend school, but learning in English was difficult. García eventually moved back to Mexico for high school and college, where he got a physical education degree. He worked as a PE teacher for about six years at a school in San Luís Potosí. He and his wife met in school and have been married for 10 years, but much of that time has been spent apart. García moved back to Austin in the hopes of giving his children more opportunities, as his father tried to do for him. "I decided, okay, let me work here and give more opportunities to my kids," he says. "I feel really powerful here. They give me more opportunities here."

He applied for a family petition to get his 8- and 4-year-old sons and his wife to the U.S. in 2016, but he's still waiting for approval. In the meantime, his wife continues to work as a teacher in Mexico and care for the kids, while García works at the nursing facility, paying bills here and sending money back to his family. During the week, his schedule is jam-packed with work. He manages the housekeeping team, making sure the facility is clean for the nursing home residents. On the weekends, he takes on various construction jobs to earn more money. He only sees his family three or four times a year, but he's hopeful they'll be together in Austin soon.

In 2017, he faced another division. As a resident of Cactus Rose, he was forced to move. He was living in a mobile home he shared with his parents, who had both eventually moved to Austin as well. The three of them were able to relocate to Austin Pecan Park, along with Nuñez and Guevara and a handful of others.

García had renovated the home not long before, so it was strong enough to be moved. He and his parents originally lived in a duplex before moving to Cactus Rose nearly a decade ago.

They had wanted a home of their own, and García's father had a friend who was selling his mobile home. They bought it and moved in to Cactus Rose. His father has since retired, but his mom works for García as a housekeeper at Heritage Park. Cactus Rose was a peaceful place for him and his parents. Now, like Nuñez and Guevara, he's been removed from his community.

"Why live in a mobile home home?" is a question García is used to. During talks with the developers, García felt there was a misunderstanding between the developers, who offered money to the families to find housing elsewhere, and the residents who didn't want or couldn't afford housing alternatives. García and his parents already owned their mobile home. They paid the previous owners over time with some interest. An apartment would be too expensive for the family to afford. Buying a new mobile home, as Madero did, would require them to start over essentially: they'd be paying additional monthly fees to pay off the home in addition to the rent for the land. And García doesn't have any credit, so his interest rate on the new home would be high. Plus, García had already put work into his home. Buying a new one would mean all of that went to waste. When the developers came, he felt as if a hurricane were coming to sweep away the life they had worked to build.

Their best option was to pick up and move everything—home included—which came with a slew of expenses. It cost $7,000 to move the home and set up gas and water. He also had to pay for six months of storage for his belongings and live in a hotel while the move was happening. The money from the developers helped ease the cost, but the move was time consuming and stressful. And now, García and his mother's commute to Heritage Park each day takes longer. They have to get up earlier, and spend twice as much time in traffic each day. It used to take them 30 minutes to get to work; now, it takes an hour, and they spend twice as much on gas each month.

In addition to rent, car insurance, and medical bills, he has his family back in Mexico to think about. García works on the weekends doing his own freelance business remodeling homes, which he has to do more often when money is tight. During the move, it was more difficult to send money back home. Any unexpected events, like one of his kids getting sick and needing to go to the doctor or his car breaking down, would affect how much extra work he needed to do that week.

He misses his family daily and hopes they'll be together in Austin soon, once all of the paperwork is processed and hopefully approved. He thinks about where they'll all live if and when they are together again. People ask him often why he doesn't just move back to Mexico. But it's not that easy. He says he would feel selfish doing that. He wants to provide the best life possible for his children, as his parents tried to give to him. Having to miss seeing his kids grow up, the long hours and working on the weekends will all be worth it one day, he says, when his children end up with careers. Most important, though, he hopes they grow up to be hardworking people, people who impact society in a positive way.

And he hopes that one day he can trade his work boots for sneakers and a whistle, returning to his job as a PE teacher. When his family gets here, fitting everyone in the mobile home will be tight, and there's always a worry in the back of his mind that what happened at Cactus Rose will happen again here. But he's not thinking about that now. His priority is getting them here and keeping them cared for financially, no matter how many hours of work it takes.

Inside Oden Hughes

Oden Hughes development company is located on the second floor of Barton Oaks Plaza, an office space in south Austin adjacent to Zilker Park. Photos of condos and apartment

complexes complete with crisp blue swimming pools decorate the walls, showcasing projects the firm has completed over the years. Metal lettering spells out “Oden Hughes” above the front desk, visible through the glass door entrance.

On a Thursday afternoon, I meet Mac McElwrath, the company’s managing director, in his office down the hall. He’s clad in a checkered button-up and square-rimmed glasses. A fish statue adorns the shelf above his desk, along with framed personal photos. His cell phone sits face up in front of him. He wants to make sure he sees it if it rings. It could be his wife, who’s at home pregnant with their first child. She could go into labor at any moment.

McElwrath has worked at Oden Hughes for seven and a half years. When the conversations about Cactus Rose residents began in 2015, he was on the frontlines, attending meetings with Almanza and the residents. The experience—the long talks, turned down agreements, city meetings — was unlike anything he’d ever experienced in the business. The company, he feels, served as guinea pigs for a city grappling with affordable housing issues and displacement.

He says Oden Hughes first acquired the property after the previous owner was no longer able to make a profit off the mobile home park. “The property taxes were becoming increasingly exorbitant because of its proximity to downtown,” McElwrath says. “The land value was more than the income generated from it, so they wanted to sell it and thought multifamily would be the highest and best use, as did we.”

The company put the property under contract to purchase from 500 Bastrop Highway Ltd., in an attempt to build an apartment community there. The 23-acre tract, six and a half acres of which made up Cactus Rose Mobile Home Park, was zoned for commercial use, not multifamily housing, so a zoning change was required to move forward. During meetings with

residents, he found that the response from the neighborhood was largely “we don’t want to move.” Thus began the the over a year long process of coming to an agreement.

In many ways, the dispute was a microcosm of the city’s changing landscape. On one hand, there was a property owner looking to sell and a development company hoping to build an apartment complex. Then there were the residents. Madero, Nuñez, Guevara, García. While they didn’t own the land they parked their trailers on, it was the place they had called home for years, and financially, their relocation options were limited. And on their side, they had Almanza, an advocate who has a reputation for standing up against gentrification in East Austin.

And in the backdrop of it all was the city, which was already grappling with how to deal with displaced residents. Several relocation mistreatments had been occurring in the city. For example, in 2009, Grayco Partners agreed to pay residents of Shoreline Apartments $485 to move out so it could get a city permit for a height extension on the apartments. However, the developers ended up paying residents only $125. Then in 2015, Cypress Real Estate Advisors told residents of Lakeview Apartments, now the site of an Oracle Corp Campus, to vacate, spurring tenant protest. Former tenants filed a lawsuit against the landlord for terminating their leases early.

“It was over a year of basically trying to work this process out, all while the city is piggybacking off of us to figure out how to handle the process,” McElwrath says.

As part of the private sphere, though, Oden Hughes worked faster than the city could. The company worked closely with Neighborhood Housing and Community Development Committee along with City Council member Pio Renteria’s office and Mayor Steve Adler’s office, in addition to the Montopolis neighborhood to figure out how best to move forward. The resulting agreement cost the company $300,000, but the total cost of the situation ended up being

closer to a half-million dollars, according to McElwrath, due to day-to-day assistance required to determine other available mobile home parks, bilingual assistance, and legal expenses.

McElwrath says this project—the 356-unit apartment complex—is still viable, despite these extra costs. However, he recognizes that not all developers in situations like this can afford such expenses. He doesn't think the burden to pay residents for relocation should be put on property owners. The Tenant Notification and Relocation Assistance Ordinance was a step in the right direction in this regard: it attempts to create a fund to help communities that face relocation.

This method is largely at odds with the state's attitude toward mobile home park protections. Texas takes a hands-off approach. Residents are not entitled to compensation, and while Texas Property Code Chapter 94 mandates a 60-day notice to residents for nonrenewal of a lease and 180-day notice to residents when an owner is requesting a change in land use, these regulations largely go unenforced. In a study, sociologist Esther Sullivan found that many Texas mobile home park residents get a mere 30-day notice, since there is not a system of oversight and no statewide homeowners association dedicated to mobile home parks. The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs Manufactured Housing Division does regulate this type of housing, but mainly tracks manufactured home production and installation. Some states, like Florida, do have such protections and oversight. These include a state trust, which is paid by all mobile homeowners in the state and gives soon-to-be-displaced residents vouchers for moving their home.

Austin's new ordinance also requires that all residents must be notified 270 days before an application for a rezone, a site plan, or a change of use permit is submitted. These nine months are intended to give tenants time to relocate. McElwrath says this is too long. At the Cactus Rose property, an extensive waiting period allowed people to take advantage of the

situation. Near the end of the period the residents were allowed to remain at Cactus Rose when the property was nearly vacated, McElwrath says there were people trespassing and taking part in illegal activity. Two of the vacated homes, carriage units that were part of the outer edge of the park, caught on fire because of drug activity. “We couldn’t do anything,” McElwrath says. “We couldn’t close on our construction loan, so we’re sitting there. We couldn’t even put a construction fence up for a period of time because we didn’t have the documentation necessary to close on a construction loan.”

Still, when asked if he would go through this process over again, knowing what the journey entailed, he says yes. He says he feels that the company did the best they could, given the fact that there was no precedence for handling a situation like this. “The reality is we were the guinea pig and now we’re not, so hopefully it would not take that long the next go around,” he says.

He also feels residents there are now living in better situations than they were before. He remembers walking through some residents’ homes and finding them living in poor conditions, with holes in their floors and ceilings. He says residents also purported to him a host of criminal activity in the park. He says some knew they weren’t living in sustainable conditions but didn’t have the means to relocate. “It was just not a healthy living situation or community at all,” McElwrath says. “You felt for these people, so you knew that if you could find a better living alternative for them, which had to be out there, they would probably take it.” In the end some went to other mobile home parks, others found new property to put their homes on, some RV owners packed up and moved out of town, and some found apartments to rent.

In the realm of mobile home parks, which often go unnoticed, the attention given to a Cactus Rose was unprecedented. According to Almanza, it was likely the first time in Texas that

mobile home park residents had been given money to relocate. Despite its unprecedented nature, it certainly wasn't the first time a mobile home park was removed in the area. An examination of listings of mobile home parks requested from the Travis Central Appraisal District shows that at least six parks have closed in Travis County since 2009.

And the relocation ordinance wasn't the be-all and end-all solution to the problem. There was still a loophole. In February 2017, shortly after it was passed, residents of another park in the Montopolis area, Thrasher Lane Mobile Home Park, were told to leave. This time, though, the owner Urban Rio LLC told residents they needed to leave without requesting a zoning change. Like many mobile home parks in Austin, the park wasn't zoned for mobile home parks, meaning the owner could easily use the land for a different purpose without requesting approval from the city. Without requesting a zoning change, the owner didn't have to comply with the relocation ordinance that gave residents more time to relocate. The 17 households were quickly uprooted.

Life after gentrification

The road that leads to Blanca Torres' home isn't much of a road at all. It's a half-mile stretch of gravel and mud, surrounded on both sides by tall grasses. In certain parts, the road dips into stark potholes, and in others, large white rocks protrude from the earth. I'm standing at the entrance of the pathway, having just pulled over off of FM 812, a road that stretches through a rural part of Del Valle. The only signs that there might be dwellings down this path are the beat up mailboxes that line the farm road. But the homes themselves aren't visible. The path leads down what looks like a nearly empty expanse of land. I'm confused. Maybe I got the address wrong.

Then, I hear her before I see her. The faint rumbling of a motor reverberates from the fields. A glimpse of blue and white metal comes into view. It's a girl driving a kid-sized four-wheeler. Her long black hair bounces up and down as she traverses potholes and hills, dust blowing up behind her. Gloria, Torres' 11-year-old daughter, has come to show me the way. I follow her slowly in my own car. No matter how slowly I go, I can't avoid rocks from scraping the bottom of my vehicle, making a horrible noise each time. Mud splatters the side of my car. Eventually, a few trailer homes come into view. It takes us about ten minutes to get to Torres'. It's a brown mobile home placed on an acre of land.

Gloria Lerma Torres rides her four-wheeler down the road that leads to her family's mobile home in Del Valle.

The sun is starting to set and the sounds of cars rushing down FM 812 have fallen away entirely. Gloria hops off her four-wheeler and bolts to go play with her cousins, who are running around outside. Torres walks down the makeshift wooden steps that lead to her home to greet me. Her husband, sister, and brother, who lives in a trailer home next door, sit on chairs around a

cooler out front. They talk to each other in Spanish while drinking Bud Lights. Their children count out loud, preparing to race each other down the path.

It's a peaceful Saturday evening with family, but there's a lot weighing on Torres. Like the fact that they've been living here for five months but still don't have potable water, internet connection or air conditioning. Or the fact that their septic tank isn't completely set up because it's so expensive. Or the fact that their commute to work and their children's schools each morning, which used to be 15 minutes, is now almost an hour.

Luis Lerma and family talk around a cooler outside their home.

And then there's the road. This weighs on her the most. Not only has it damaged her car a few times, it's also impossible to travel on when it rains. The earth turns to mud, causing their cars to get stuck. She prays often it doesn't rain. Rain means her kids have to miss school and she has to miss work.

Living here on this plot of land on the outskirts of Austin wasn't Torres and her husband Luis Lerma's first choice. In fact, they didn't really have a choice at all. When they got the notice that everyone at Thrasher Lane Mobile Home Park, their home for the past 11 years, wasn't going to be able to renew their leases, they had to act fast. They received the notification on Feb. 17, 2017, telling them they needed to move their home and all of their belongings by March 31. If they didn't comply, their homes would be destroyed.

Torres and Lerma hit the ground running trying to find a new place to live. They searched for other mobile home parks in Austin, but none worked out. Their home was built in 1996, making it too old for any of the nearby parks to accept. Plus, since Cactus Rose sent over 50 families packing not long before, many of the open spots were taken up. And the families didn't get to reap the benefits of the tenant notification ordinance — namely, the 270-day waiting period — because the park owner wasn't applying for a zoning change.

The 42-day deadline didn't seem like enough time. Torres started reaching out to her neighbors and anyone who could help. But she struggled to find assistance because she only speaks Spanish. Eventually, someone put her in touch with Almanza, who had helped Cactus Rose residents. Almanza then began mediating between the families at Thrasher Lane and the owner, Urban Rio LLC. They held meetings, asking the landowner to extend the deadline so their children could finish out the school year. Urban Rio agreed, allowing them to stay until May 31, and following the lead of Cactus Rose, the residents were able to hash out a deal in which the owner gave each family $7,000 to help with relocation costs.

But they didn't want to leave. Thrasher Lane Mobile Home Park was a small strip of about 15 mobile homes off Thrasher Lane in the Montopolis area. Torres remembers it as a peaceful, pretty street where everyone knew each other and strangers didn't pass through. In the first few years they lived there, she remembers some of her neighbors sold drugs, but they were quickly removed and things had been peaceful ever since.

Some residents ended up moving to apartments. Some sold their trailers and purchased new ones. A few found places in Montopolis, others moved out to Del Valle. Torres and Lerma couldn't afford an apartment, let alone a new home. They were still paying off their current mobile home, which they didn't want to abandon. It was the roof they'd worked so hard to put

over their heads. It was the first house they bought as a married couple, and the house their children, Gloria and Ulixis, grew up in.

Gloria Lerma Torres, Blanca Torres and Luis Lerma stand in front of their home.

They eventually heard through a friend that they could rent land in Del Valle. The monthly rent for an acre would be a bit more expensive each month, $400, than it was at Thrasher, where they spent $325 a month before utilities—and they were still paying off their mobile home, which is $500 a month—but it was the best option they could find. Torres' brother who also lived at Thrasher and another neighbor also decided to move their homes out here.

Gloria finished the fifth grade, and Ulixis completed his sophomore year of high school, and then the family packed up and moved. The move was far from easy. The land had no hookups for water or electricity. They had to pay to bring gravel to the pathway in front of it so they could drive their home down it. They had to purchase a water tank, electrical equipment and a septic system, all of which were costly endeavors. In total, they've spent around $18,000 to make their home livable again.

Now each Saturday, Torres purchases enough water for the week to fill a large tank, which then pumps water into their home. No one comes to pick up their trash, so they burn it in an aluminum canister behind their house, a process that worries her, since their home is nearby. Since no one comes to take their recycling either, two large barrels of water bottles and plastic

containers sit in the yard behind their home, next to a storage shed and chicken coop Lerma made with leftover materials from his job in construction.

They still lack necessities like air conditioning and internet connection. Since there's no internet connection out here, their children attend school early and stay late so they can use the wifi there to finish their homework assignments. Since her commute has tripled, Torres spends $250 on gas each month.

Gloria still remembers her first day in Del Valle. Even though the living room and her bedroom all looked the same, she and Ulixis could still feel something was off. The same brown sofa sat in the living room, and the same painting of the Last Supper still hung on the wall next to the kitchen table. Gloria's poofy, white First Communion dress still stuck out of her closet. The kids' pet turtle still sat outside Ulixis' bedroom. But when they looked outside, they didn't see their neighbors, just dirt and grass and sky. *Let's go home, let's go home,* they kept thinking.


A statue of the Virgin Mary sits in Torres' living room.

As far as the home itself, Gloria likes it, though she wishes her room were bigger. Still, she has one of her own and so does her brother. It's the only home she knows. Her family moved into it when she was just three months old. Now a sixth grader at the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, she spends her free time riding four-wheelers and swinging on the makeshift swing out back with her cousins or playing her favorite video game in her room Call of Duty: Ghosts. Mostly, though, she's studying. She's still

deciding what she wants to be when she grows up. Right now, it's between engineer, detective or judge. She also likes to study languages and wants to travel. China, Paris and Jerusalem are a few places on her list.

She likes her school, but the commute is much longer now than it used to be. Torres wakes her up at 6:30, then she eats breakfast and heads to school. Then Torres heads to her job at an alterations shop in South Austin, where her shift doesn't end until after Gloria's school day is over. Gloria stays after doing homework in the library or with the after-school Boys and Girls Club program. A junior at Austin High School, Ulixis drives himself to school, unless his car is broken, which has happened a few times because of the rough road. At the end of the day, they get home around 6:30 p.m. and Torres makes dinner. Then she finishes any work she has taken home with her—shirts to mend or pants to alter—while her kids do homework. The next day, she gets up and does it all over again.

Torres wishes she could open up her own business one day, altering clothes. When she lived at Thrasher Lane, this was more plausible. She had clients who would come to her directly, dropping off clothes for her to sew. Now, though, she's lost these clients because she lives too far away.

Sometimes, Torres and Gloria drive by their old place when they're in town picking up groceries. The property is empty, still, and they wonder what's going to become of it. Gloria doesn't think it's fair. "They haven't even started to do anything," she says. "They said they were going to do buildings. They barely even started to cut the trees … Every time we go there, we're like, 'My house, my house. We lived there.'"

City takes notice

After Urban Rio LLC told Thrasher Lane residents to leave, the company sold the land to new owners TLH Riverside 6507MF-1, LP, who saw the property as a prime spot for redevelopment. The land was zoned for single family housing, though, so TLH went before the city to apply for zoning that would allow for something bigger — townhomes and condos. But in December 2017, when TLH Riverside took its zoning case to the Planning Commission, their plans came to a startling halt.

At the hearing, leaders from the Montopolis Neighborhood Plan Contact Team like Almanza advocated against the rezone, stating that the process was unfair to the mobile home residents who used to live there. As the meeting was nearing midnight, one commissioner, Nuria Zaragoza, harkened back to the Cactus Rose case, saying if the Thrasher Lane residents had had a chance to speak, they would have had a lot to say.

"I can tell you I was here for the Cactus Rose hearings, and they were heartwrenching," Zaragoza told the commission. "I feel like we need to send a message that it is not OK to displace those residents and then ask for a zoning change afterward. I think we need to let the community know that our memory is long for those cases and we will remember them."

Commissioner Conor Kenny then called the case a "parable of the horrors of gentrification." "Not only are they wiping it bear and displacing people to replace it with higher priced stuff, but by all accounts and appearances, the previous owners purposely circumvented a deliberate city council policy to alleviate the costs and burdens of displacements specifically for mobile home residents," Kenny said. "I don't think we as the commision should be complicit in that."

By the end of discussions, the Planning Commission voted against recommending the rezone to the City Council. A precedent had been set.

After the planning commission voted against recommending the zoning change, the owners then had to take their request to the City Council, but TLH Riverside later dropped the rezone request. It would remain zoned for single family dwellings. But for Torres and the other families who once lived there, the city's sudden interest in the Thrasher property came too late.

What's next?

Inside Austin's modern, pristine City Hall, members of the city government have been in the process of revising the city's Land Development Code. This initiative, called CodeNEXT, is the first major rewrite to the code in 30 years. It will determine how land can be used throughout the city—basically, what can be built where. The first draft didn't mention mobile home parks, nor did the second, though affordable housing is a key concern of the initiative.

But by early 2018, it was clear the conversation spurred by mobile home park residents captured the city's attention. The third draft of CodeNEXT, released in February, showed a determination to keep mobile home parks in Austin. A number of mobile home parks here are not zoned for mobile home parks, as was the case with Thrasher Lane and Cactus Rose, so they are ripe for redevelopment at any time. The third draft, though, rezones several existing mobile home parks as mobile home parks.

This designation makes it more difficult for an owner to redevelop the land on which mobile home parks sit. In order to build anything other than a mobile home park on land zoned for mobile home parks, they'd have to apply for a zoning change, which would have to go

through a city process. And if landowners want that passed, they would have to give residents a 270-day move out notice.

But CodeNEXT is still up in the air. The City Council had been expected to vote on the third draft in April, but the date has since been pushed to the summer. Those spearheading the inclusion of mobile home parks in the initiative hope it will be passed. Conor Kenny, who stood up for mobile home residents at the December Planning Commission hearing by calling the actions of Urban Rio and TLH Riverside examples of gentrification, is one of them. He says he doesn't want to see any more of these residents displaced.

But why are so many parks not zoned for mobile home parks in the first place? Kenny says this is a consequence of the neighborhood plan contact teams, who developed their neighborhood plans years ago. "A lot of times the contact teams have a very homeowner-centric bias, and I don't know if that was the case with the Montopolis plan, but what they ended up with was a plan that essentially targeted these trailer homes and mobile home parks for redevelopment," Kenny says. "That is something that Council Member [Greg] Casar and I have been working to address in CodeNEXT to make sure that these parks are not eligible for redevelopment right away, that they actually do have to go through a rezoning process."

Then there's the question of whether or not these parks will remain profitable in a city where land is being scooped up to build more housing. In order to keep up with property taxes and still make a profit off mobile home parks, park owners may have to raise their rent. This happened in 2015 when North Lamar Mobile Home Park in Northeast Austin was bought by Frank Rolfe and Dave Reynolds, a pair of mobile home park moguls who rank fifth for owning the greatest number of mobile home parks in the U.S. and are famous for hosting weekend "boot camps" across the country through their business Mobile Home University. At North Lamar,

they raised the rent in order to make a profit off the place, causing an uproar. Many residents feared they'd have to leave, and they knew moving their home would be expensive and finding an empty lot in Austin would be difficult. They formed a residents' association and garnered the help of Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid, filing a lawsuit against the owners for altering their leases.

Rolfe and Reynolds agreed to put off the changes in rent until the following year when their current contracts would have ended. But residents are still paying more than they had in the past, and are trying to purchase the park themselves to prevent the same thing from happening in the future. They have enlisted the help of organizations like Resident Owned Communities USA, a nonprofit network that helps mobile home park residents transition to self-ownership. First, the park residents must form a cooperative and then secure a loan to purchase the land. Of course, the park owners must also be willing to sell. Sometimes ROC USA, which is located in Rhode Island, itself grants loans, but it requires the residents to first form a cooperative. Nearly three years after forming this plan, the residents of North Lamar have finally found a local organization that can aid in their transition to an official cooperative.

Despite the fact they are the last vestiges of affordable housing, Kenny says more mobile home parks likely won't be built in Austin. CodeNEXT doesn't add more mobile home park zoning to areas that don't have mobile home parks in them already. "That's just the reality of the economics of it," he says. "We can do a lot to preserve the ones that are already here, but as far as reviving Thrasher of any other park, I would like to think so, but I'm afraid they are just gone for good."

Some think the city should provide more mobile home park lands. Almanza says the city should designate city-owned land to mobile home park use, so they stay affordable for a long time and so that those who have been displaced can move there. Elizabeth Mueller, a professor

of community and regional planning at UT-Austin and member of the CodeNEXT advisory board, suggests the city use funds or bonds to purchase land that mobile home owners can move their homes to, with the help of relocation funds that developers should provide.“I would like to see more land zoned for mobile home parks and that the new code and associated policy facilitates the purchase of such land by the city or nonprofit land trusts,” she says.

She also suggests another option would be for residents to collectively purchase parks, with support from a nonprofit organization, as North Lamar Mobile Home Park is attempting. This idea is more popular in the Northeast, especially in New Hampshire, where the state has a loan fund and organizations exist that help residents purchase their parks.

Mueller says mobile home parks should be included in the upcoming affordable housing bond proposal. She’d like to see bond funds support the creation of resident-owned or land trust-owned mobile home parks.

If the City Council approves, Austin residents will vote on an $851-million bond package to fund projects in the city in November. Right now, it’s recommended that $161 million of it goes to affordable housing projects. But so far, three City Council members have said they want to double this amount to $300 million, which would be the largest housing bond ever presented to voters in Austin history.

The road

On a Monday evening in February, there’s food on the stove. A clothing line with blouses and pants is strung across the living room. Torres’ sewing machines sit in one corner. It’s warm enough outside to keep the front door open to let fresh air in. A few weeks ago, though, things

weren't this good. A cold front had brought freezing temperatures to South Texas, and their heater was busted. They were so cold they all slept in the same room.

Today, though, the weather is reasonable, but it's windy and clouds have been rolling in. Torres checks the weather from her smart phone frequently, their only source of internet, and the forecast shows a week of rain. This worries her greatly. Since moving here, her kids have had to miss three days of school because they couldn't get their car down the road because of bad weather. Her children's education is Torres' main priority. It's her motivation in life. It's why she decided to raise her children in the U.S. and keeps commuting to Austin — she wants them to attend good schools. She prays that someone will help them. The land they rent is private, so there's nothing the city can do to fix the road, but she wishes someone would donate materials to fix it to help her and the other families that live along it.

Torres came to the U.S. from Mexico when she was 21, wanting to escape poverty and the domestic violence she experienced at home. But she never thought things would be this bad here. Sometimes she feels as if she's living on a ranch, poorer than any she'd seen in the country she left behind. In many ways, the road that leads to Torres' home is not unlike the road that led her to Del Valle, where she feels poor and isolated, in the first place. She's faced unexpected turbulence, gotten stuck, but still

The road in front of Torres' home is a pathway of gravel and dirt. During rainstorms, it turns to mud.

finds a way through. She remembers Ulixis and Gloria. Their education, their futures. Tomorrow, she'll get up and drive down the road again.

For a while, Thrasher Lane was an ideal fix. She and her husband could afford a home. They were close to work and school. They had a community. Here, she feels isolated. No one comes to pick up their trash. Their home and the road in front of it don't show up on a GPS. The city may be paying more attention to mobile home parks now, with their inclusion of them in CodeNEXT. But stuck out here, Torres feels invisible.

"No existimos," she says. *We don't exist.*

TREATISE

I grew up in an affluent North Texas suburb, one that unfurled new shopping centers, a riverwalk, and numerous new housing developments during the fourteen years I lived there. Trees were removed as roads widened to adjust for the influx of people flooding the area. Flower Mound is now one of the wealthiest cities in the state. With a median household income of $118,692, it does not seem like the kind of town that would have mobile home parks. But like most towns, it does — they're just hidden, tucked behind trees or on the outskirts. Each day on my way to high school, I would pass a strip of mobile homes surrounded by a wooden fence behind a Dick's Sporting Goods and across from the town's SuperTarget. It was located in a central part of the city. The kids there went to my high school, but I never really thought much about it. When I moved to college, I forgot about it completely. Then, when I visited Flower Mound a year and a half ago, I was shocked to find that even though the town kept developing, the mobile home park was still there. New estates had cropped up on the other side of it, sending long shadows over the park. That image struck me: two-story brick homes juxtaposed with old trailer homes, shielded from public view. It encapsulated everything I knew at the time about income inequality. The "haves" were seen; the "have-nots" were not.

Since then, I decided to pay more attention. I started researching mobile home parks in Austin and was surprised to learn that there were over 40 in the city. I had not seen any there before, aside from the famous upscale RV park on Barton Springs Boulevard, where apparently Matthew McConaughey stayed sometimes. I wanted to know about this world. What was life like to live in these hidden communities? How did it feel to be associated with the phrase "trailer trash?" So, I started talking to people. I interviewed code officers, numerous residents, city officials, developers, park owners, and affordable housing experts. A work of creative

nonfiction, *Mobile Home, America* is a culmination of interviews and research into the world of mobile home parks. But it was also a personal journey, one driven by my desire to tell stories that often go untold, and, ultimately, one that changed how I understand the world.

At the beginning of this project, my second reader Kathleen McElroy told me to think about how I would answer the following question: As a journalist, how would you cover inequality? She simply wanted me to think about how I would answer that question if an employer asked me it in a job interview, but it is a question I have come back to again and again throughout the course of this project. As journalists, we are taught, it is our duty to question the status quo, be a check on the powerful. It would seem that scouting out inequality should motivate everything we do. But how do we do it? How does someone like me, who grew up with the privilege of not having to recognize income inequality in the first place, write about it? I have found it is something like this: sit and listen. And realize that even then, you still won't get it. You won't truly understand what it is like to be displaced or to lose your community. At the end of the day, you still get to go home.

This is in no way to say telling stories is fruitless. There is value in attempting to understand people from different backgrounds. But it would be disingenuous of me to say that I suddenly understand inequality because, the truth is, I will never know it like the people in this story have known it.

What I and other journalists can do, though, is write down people's stories. These are stories that are systematically hidden. These are perspectives that do not get heard because there are a number of barriers between them and the public sphere. For starters, many of these families do not speak English. Blanca Torres, for example, struggled (and still struggles) to find the help she and her family need because she only speaks Spanish. She continues to try to find an

organization that will fix the road in front of her house so they can drive down it safely, even in the rain. By speaking with advocates like Susana Almanza, I also learned that many mobile home park residents in Austin are undocumented. Fear of retaliation often prevents them from speaking up or learning their rights in the first place. Their silence is the norm. Bringing their stories to the forefront, therefore, questions the status quo.

My goal with this piece was never to point fingers or advocate for a specific group. Instead, it was simply to tell stories, to lay out the opinions that are out there on this subject through detailed storytelling. There were a number of writers who influenced me to do so.

Influences

I am inspired by those who go to great lengths to shrink barriers between themselves and their subjects. Sociologist and author Matthew Desmond spent eight years living in low-income areas of Milwaukee, following families being evicted from apartment complexes and trailer parks. He did not simply report on these families; he lived in the same conditions as they did. His book *Evicted* is a work of narrative nonfiction that tells these individuals' stories. Through poignant scenes, he demonstrates how evictions perpetuate poverty within communities. He did not simply strive to write a book about poor people. In fact, he was irritated by how journalists and social scientists write about poor communities as if they are cut off from the rest of society. "The poor were said to be 'invisible' or part of 'the other America'..." he wrote in an afterword of the book. "Why, I wondered, have we documented how the poor make ends meet without asking why their bills are so high or where their money is flowing?"[1] He saw poverty as a relationship, one that involves both poor and rich people alike. Telling a story simply about how

[1] Matthew Desmond, *Evicted* (New York: Broadway Books-Crown Publishing Group, 2017), 316-317.

a poor family makes ends meet would not be the whole truth. Writing about eviction enabled Desmond to demonstrate that poverty is a process, one that worsens eviction after eviction. This book encouraged me to avoid profiling individuals living in a seemingly invisible communities in my own work. I needed to reveal the whole truth: the processes that led them to live in mobile homes in the first place, the events that led to their displacement, where their hardships stemmed from, and the way they got their voices heard, becoming less invisible in the process.

In order to prevent a false conception that mobile home residents are truly isolated from the rest of the world, I needed to shed light on those who influenced their situations. I needed to talk to the developers that caused their displacement and city officials who determined the policies that would affect them. Desmond did the same in his work. In addition to writing the perspectives of individuals struggling to pay rent and being forced to find a new place to live after an eviction, he also takes readers into the minds of those doing the evicting: the landlords. As a reader you see their motivations to make a living. They have mortgages to pay and utility payments that they cannot let slide without facing repercussions. All these details prevent readers from placing all the blame on owners; they are people with conflicting problems as well. There is a whole network of demands at work.

I sought to demonstrate that in my project as well. When writing the perspective of development company Oden Hughes, I tried to show that the workers there, too, were people, not simply an entity seeking to displace residents. I found it particularly telling that on the day I visited the company's offices, Mac McElwrath, the company's managing director who worked on the 500 Bastrop Highway redevelopment, where Cactus Rose sat, was waiting for a call from his wife who was about to go into labor with their first child. This demonstrated to me that he was a person trying to support his family, not unlike the other families I reported on. I listened to

and portrayed his mindset: he believed that by displacing Cactus Rose residents, he was helping them find a better way of living by getting them out of the mobile home park, which he saw as dilapidated and dangerous.

In addition to Desmond's reporting choices, I was influenced by his writing itself. Narrative nonfiction is driven by vivid scenes, which he accomplishes in his book. A scene is particularly helpful in narrative journalism when it enables a reader to understand another person's point of view. For example, there is a scene in *Evicted* in which one of the protagonists, Larraine, uses her food stamps to purchase a single, expensive meal: lobster tails, shrimp, crab, salad and pie.[2] A biased writer might use that scene to say she is a wasteful person or to imply she brings poverty upon herself. An inexperienced writer might have been afraid to use that scene at all. But Desmond uses the scene and lets Larraine explain why she does this: she wanted to feel happy for a night. She could see no end in sight to her financial situation — no amount of hard work or good behavior could bring her out of poverty — but this meal she could at least enjoy. That scene is powerful because it vividly demonstrates the hopelessness poverty can impose on people.

I attempted to use scenes to demonstrate marginalized people's mindsets in my piece as well. For example, some people were quick to wonder why residents of Cactus Rose and Thrasher Lane did not simply use the relocation assistance they were given to move into an apartment. I incorporated details like Francisco Nuñez and Rafaela Guevara's love for their home, which is demonstrated in how they care for it, to show that homeownership is important to them. I tried to show that Blanca Torres, too, felt her home was significant because it was the first place she and her husband bought together. It was the place where they raised their children. By employing these details, I hoped to illuminate the mobile home residents' points of view.

[2] Desmond, 215.

In many ways, I was inspired to write this project because of what I was not seeing. In local newspapers like the *Austin American-Statesman*, I saw articles chronicling the Cactus Rose debates, but I did not find much reporting that went deeper than that. Reporters did not follow up with residents after the case was resolved either, even though there were a number of issues that lingered, like the fact that residents were not comfortable in their new neighborhoods and their commutes to work were impacted. Thrasher Lane got even less coverage. I found just one article about the situation there. The story mentioned the park was closing and residents may struggle to find new places to live,[3] but there were no follow up articles that showed what happened to any of these residents after their removal. I wanted to fill that gap.

Some articles did dig into the larger issues. One *Statesman* article, for example, entitled "Poor tenants vs. development: Case microcosm of changing East Austin" delineated the various sides of the affordable housing debate, including the need to construct more housing developments to assuage Austin's affordable housing crisis and the mobile home residents' belief that they were in fact living in affordable housing.[4] Some, like Almanza, for example, argued there was a housing bias: although mobile homes are the last bastions of affordable housing in Austin, they are still being replaced by more expensive housing to supposedly increase the supply of "affordable" housing units.

Still, this article did not explore the broader, nationwide context of this situation. The summer before I began this project, I was visiting family in Chesterfield, Missouri, a suburb outside of St. Louis. I found that the last mobile home park in the town was closing down, evicting 140 households. The town had grown up over the years, bringing new shopping centers

[3] Nancy Flores, "Mobile home residents face relocation amid affordable housing shortage," *Austin American-Statesman* 31 March 2017: *mystatesman.com.* Web. 4 April 2018.

[4] Shonda Novak, "Poor tenants vs. development: Case microcosm of changing East Austin," *Austin American-Statesman* 19 Feb 2016: *mystatesman.com.* Web. 4 April 2018.

and housing projects. The property owner of the park wanted to make way for a 298-unit apartment complex. Seeing this story made me realize that mobile home park closures happen across the country, especially as suburbs and cities expand. I grew interested in the larger context. What were other states doing to cope with this problem? I incorporated details in my piece such as the fact that Texas has a largely hands-off attitude toward helping residents with displacement. Florida and New Hampshire provide more aid.

These newspaper articles also did not reveal the daily lives of these individuals in the ways that I was curious about. In most cases, the first paragraph of the newspaper article would start with a brief synopsis of a resident's story: they were being removed and did not know where to go next. There was little background on the families beyond that. I was interested in what the daily lives of these people looked like. I understand that the inability to spend time observing these seemingly miniscule details is one of the downfalls of newspaper reporting. It is an issue that encouraged journalist Gay Talese, for example, to shift from newspaper reporting to narrative nonfiction. In his essay, "Delving into Private Lives," Talese writes about how he left his position at *The New York Times* after ten years "because of the limitations of daily journalism: space and time." He writes:

> The limited time one could devote to the indulgence of one's curiosity made it somewhat frustrating to stay on a daily newspaper. I wanted to spend more time with people who were not necessarily newsworthy. I believed then—and I believe now—that the role of the nonfiction writer should be with private people whose lives represent a larger significance.[5]

[5] Gay Talese, "Delving into Private Lives," *Telling True Stories*, Eds. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (New York: Plume, 2007), 7.

I shared Talese's feelings, so I took this project as an opportunity to get to know the individuals in this story and shed light on how they see the world. I enjoyed learning that Saúl Madero was not simply a disgruntled resident trying to squeeze money out of the developers. He had a history of fighting for what he believed in, ever since he was a young boy in Mexico deciding to join the military because he wanted to learn how to stick up for people in his community. Also, Madero and others in this piece represent a larger significance, as Talese notes. They represent the stakes in the affordable housing conversation that is unfolding across the nation. You have the property owner looking to sell and the development company hoping to build new complexes, residents being displaced to pave the way for this construction, city officials expected to deal with these issues, and community leaders advocating for human rights.

Beyond that, their individual personalities make for a compelling story. Journalist David Halberstam, known for his narrative journalism works like *The Fifties* and *Firehouse*, advocated that a good work of narrative nonfiction must be driven by the *idea*. In his essay "The Narrative Idea," Halberstam wrote, "Taking an idea, a central point, and pursuing it, turning it into a story that tells something about the way we live today, is the essence of narrative journalism."[6] I wanted this story to show what development does to individuals and how they respond. As I was reporting, several themes emerged.

Themes

The overarching theme of this project was displacement. The story opens with imagery of a mobile home park after it has been almost completely cleared out. What remains is garbage and the rectangular outlines of empty plots. It is clear the neighborhood will never look the same

[6] David Halberstam, "The Narrative Idea," *Telling True Stories*, Eds. Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (New York: Plume, 2007), 11.

again. This project made me think about how strange it is that places can simply disappear, even though they remain vivid in our memories. The neighborhood you once called home, the house you grew up in. As I was working on this piece, I had a constant reminder of how quickly places can disappear. I live in an apartment complex near the university. When I moved in, there was a small house next to it. Not more than a month later, a truck came and hauled it off. Throughout the semester, I watched from my bedroom window as a new apartment complex rose up in its place. I could not help but wonder how that family felt, knowing the place that was once their home was now something they could never return to. Before I went off to college, I had only moved once in my life — when my family moved from Missouri to Texas. On every visit we made back to Missouri, we would drive by our old place and memories would come flooding back. It struck me that this family could not do that. The residents of Cactus Rose of Thrasher Lane could not do that either. When Madero showed me around the remains of Cactus Rose, I could see he was thinking about what the space used to feel like. He pointed out different areas of the park, explaining what they used to look like.

For Blanca Torres and her family, moving did not mean leaving their physical home, but leaving the city and neighborhood they had known. When I talked with Gloria, Torres' 11-year-old daughter, she told me how different things felt when they first move here. Even though her room still looked the same, she kept thinking, *When are we going to go home?* Displacement hit the Torres family the hardest. They spent the most money, had to move the farthest away, and even though almost a year has passed since they moved, they still do not have basic necessities like air conditioning and potable water. Their experience demonstrates the role displacement has in perpetuating poverty. Their former lives were erased. Starting over was not easy. The amount of money the family spends on gas each month skyrocketed. Torres' ability to grow her

alterations business was destroyed. Her children's access to the internet for school work was diminished, and their ability to get to school was also hindered. Until the road in front of their home is paved, they will be victims of the weather, unable to leave when it rains.

And for several of these families, this was not their first experience with displacement. Torres, for example, left her original home in Mexico because of domestic abuse. Guevara from Cactus Rose experienced a similar situation. They were pushed out of their homes before, and the pattern has continued in the U.S. This pattern only heightens their fears of future displacement. Guevara's husband, Nuñez, for example, expressed uncertainty about their future at Austin Pecan Park, where they moved after Cactus Rose shut down. He worries development could reach the outskirts of the city in the future.

Throughout this narrative, I also came to see mobile homes as manifestations of the American Dream. Each one of the residents I interviewed was an immigrant from Mexico. Many came with the hopes of a better life for themselves or for their children. For Oscar García, the hope that he could provide more financial support for his two children who still live in Mexico brought him here. For Torres, her motivation was also her children. She repeatedly told me that her children's education is her main priority in life. She commutes to Austin so her children can go to good schools. Her daughter attends the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, and she made sure her son could transfer to Austin High School, rather than attend schools in Del Valle, which do not rank as well. Purchasing a mobile home was an affordable option that enabled them to live in the city. It was also an achievable pathway to homeownership, which for many decades has been a symbol of success in the U.S.

In a study, sociologist Margarethe Kusenbach surveyed several immigrant residents living in mobile home communities in Florida. Kusenbach found that although mobile homes are

often sources of social stigma and shame among those who adhere to middle class standards, many Latino immigrants do not agree with this viewpoint. They are proud to own their homes.[7] This pride was mirrored in the situations of Torres, Guevara, and Nuñez. They loved their homes. That was part of the reason they did not want to abandon them. Madero, too, with his new mobile home, was proud he could provide the space for his family.

In this story, though, it is apparent that the American Dream was little more than that — a dream. The mobile home owners in this story admitted that they ended up in situations that they never intended to find themselves in. For example, Madero recognizes that he never got to pursue his dream of becoming a soldier in the U.S. military. Torres, too, mentions that she never thought she would end up in a situation worse than what she saw in Mexico. She says she feels as if she is living on a ranch poorer than those one would find in Mexico. For García, his family life still is not settled. He has yet to be able to bring his wife and two kids to the States, but he says he would feel selfish if he did not work in the U.S. to support his children. That is what his father did for him, so it is what he feels he should do for them. The U.S. to him has always represented opportunity, but it's also keeping his family apart.

Perhaps the scene that best symbolizes this shattering of the American Dream occurs in the opening section. When I walked around the Cactus Rose property after the homes had been removed, I found a book lying on the ground, tattered and covered in dirt, called *A House Blessing*. The picture book contained paintings of houses accompanied by a prayer, blessing the home and its inhabitants. Knowing this book once belonged to a resident conveyed to me that owning a home was in fact significant to these families. The homes were mobile homes, but they were still sanctuaries, ones families hoped would bring them happiness and peace. The most

[7] Margarethe Kusenbach, "'Look at My House!' Home and Mobile Home Ownership among Latino/a Immigrants in Florida," *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2017, pp. 29-47.

telling line in the book said: “May the strength of its walls make you safe, keeping peace within and trouble without.” Seeing the book left behind and covered in dirt showed that this hope was not reality. Despite their homeownership, the families were still susceptible to displacement. No factory-built walls could keep them safe.

It is clear, though, that not everyone sees a mobile home as a viable home. In this piece, a culture clash was apparent. The residents found their homes valuable. For Guevara and Nuñez, their home was something they took care of. They kept it clean and in good shape. García, too, had put work into his home. Each resident was willing to invest in this piece of property. However, it is clear that the city did not treat them as homeowners, nor did the developers. Prior to the city’s inclusion in the tenant relocation ordinance, it was not necessary to give them more than a 60-day notice to relocate. The fact that many of these mobile home parks sit on land that is not zoned for mobile home parks also demonstrates how they are not given proper attention. They are vulnerable and invisible in ways that stick-built homeowners are not. The city also does not appear to have an interest in building more mobile home parks, even though one of their key issues right now is the construction of more affordable housing. When Almanza and residents attempted to get the city to dedicate some of its city-owned land to creating a new space for Cactus Rose residents, the City Council did not agree to it.

When I spoke with Mac McElwrath of Oden Hughes development company, he mentioned that he did not see mobile homes as viable housing options. He said he felt that he was helping individuals by getting them out of Cactus Rose, which he thought was not a safe environment. While residents found their homes valuable, he did not think that residents should be living in a property that loses value over time.

Despite the mobile home residents' hardships, I continued to find a resilience among these individuals, one that flowed throughout the piece. Torres kept working hard because of her dedication to her children's education. Even though they are in a rough living situation, she repeatedly told me she was happy to at least have a home. She feels grateful not to be homeless.

Resilience was also apparent in these individuals' hard work. García had spent years working at a nursing home, where he worked his way up to the housekeeping supervisor position, even though he has a teaching degree. To keep up with his house and car payments and to support his family back in Mexico, he works weekends doing freelance construction work. He still maintains hope that his family will be with him soon and that he could eventually transition to teaching again. The most apparent example of resilience was Madero's dedication to his cause. He wanted to fight for his community and garnered a following. The residents got their voices heard in city meetings. The noise they made ended up making a difference. Although their situations are not perfect at the moment and vulnerabilities still exist, it is clear that what they did encouraged the city to take their points of view into consideration. The City Council included mobile home parks in the tenant relocation ordinance, providing residents with a longer relocation notice and potentially displacement compensation in case of redevelopment. In the Thrasher Lane case, the planning commission demonstrated their disapproval of developers pursuing a loophole when removing mobile home park residents. And finally, the third draft of CodeNEXT — if passed — will provide protections to mobile home park residents, as the city continues to develop.

Conclusion

Before I had chosen to pursue this project, I went on a ride-along interview with a code officer to different mobile home parks in Austin. We drove around in his truck, as he pointed out what code violations he typically looks for and told me which parks were nice and new and which were old and not well-kept. Some were so disheveled, he said, he felt like he was walking into a third world country when inspecting them. As we drove around, we stayed in the car, almost like tourists on a safari. I saw that some homes were falling apart. Potholes were abundant throughout many of the parks. The ride-along was helpful because it showed me where many of Austin's parks are located. I was seeing a part of Austin I had not seen before. The experience peeled back one layer of my gestalt of Austin. It was not simply the exciting city I moved to for college, full of music festivals and trendy restaurants. It was full of inequalities. But I could tell there were still more layers between me and these residents. I was in a car, just along for the ride, capable of leaving at any time. As I continued this project, more and more layers of my understanding of this city were peeled back. A more complex image emerged.

After observing parks, I read about them. I learned how susceptible these communities are to redevelopment. I kept up with policy changes happening in the city in regards to tenant relocation and CodeNEXT. I read about their history and meaning, how they became popular after World War II and how some immigrant communities saw them as their ticket to homeownership. Then, I reached out to individual residents. I spoke with them in Spanish, learning why they loved their homes, what problems they faced, and what their motivations and aspirations were. I watched them at work. I saw them interact with their children. They were no longer hypothetical representations of hardship in my mind.

Too, I came to see the processes at play that worsen inequality: the factors that lead a city to expand and displace residents, how a city handles its vulnerable populations, and what makes certain populations more vulnerable than others. I realized that if we do not look and do not observe, we do not see this. More than that, I got to listen to stories, stories that were deeply human. The protagonists were real people with hopes and dreams, with senses of humor and passions. Displacement reveals people's vulnerabilities — and their resilience. They were more than their hardships, and their stories stuck with me when even when I was not writing.

In February of 2018, I texted Torres to see how she and her family were doing, after a cold front had come in. She told me their heater had busted. Moments like this one highlighted my separation from the people I was interviewing. After each interview with them, I knew that I got to go home to my apartment in the center of the city, equipped with heat, potable water, and electricity. This difference in some ways made me feel defeated. At the end of the day, I got a story, but what did the subjects of it get? I think this is a question I will continue to struggle with as I continue my reporting career.

This work taught me a lot of things — how to write something of this length, how to convey scenes, how to be a better Spanish speaker — but most importantly, it taught me how to be a world observer. It taught me how necessary it is to look past my own worldview and understand those of others. If anything, I hope this project does the same for those who read it. I hope it gives insight into the lives of an often marginalized community. While it does not come to any grand conclusion or solution, it does tell stories, and stories promote empathy.

BIOGRAPHY

Marisa Charpentier was born in St. Louis, Missouri, though she grew up in Flower Mound, Texas, a suburb outside Dallas. She enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin as a Plan II and journalism major in 2014. There, her love for language was able to flourish. She pursued a Spanish minor and studied Spanish at the University of Cantabria in Santander, Spain, during the summer of 2016. She also dabbled in fiction writing as part of UT's Creative Writing Certificate Program. While on campus, she spent two years reporting for *The Daily Texan* and then interned at three magazines in Austin. Her latest internship was at KUT News, Austin's National Public Radio Station. A journalist, she has had work published in *Texas Monthly*, *The Dallas Morning News*, KUT News, *The Alcalde*, and *Austin Woman*. After graduation, she plans to be a freelance writer for various publications in Austin and beyond.